

Statement prepared by
Barbara P. Wyatt, President
Parents' Music Resource Center
on Music Lyrics
before the
United States Senate Commerce Committee
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I speak as President of the Parents' Music Resource Center which was founded in 1985. In 1996 I became president having been on the board since one year after its inception. As a music major I can speak with knowledge as to the effects of music.

In 1985 four mothers, Susan Baker, Tipper Gore, Pam Hower, and Sally Nevius became aware of recordings purchased by their children. They were appalled by what they heard and decided to see if these messages were common. Much to their surprise and horror they discovered that many recordings on the market include profane, violent, and sexually explicit lines, plus some advocate drug and alcohol use, suicide and even necrophilia. Not only were the lyrics disgusting, enclosures and covers were bad or worse. In talking with other parents, the mothers found that most were unaware of the contents of popular music. Parents would often voice their feelings with "turn that thing down, I don't want to hear it" or would make the firm statement, "Go in your room if you are going to listen to that!" They were unaware of the contents of their listening progeny.

The women decided it was vital to launch an educational campaign. A board of concerned parents was created and the PMRC was born. Within months there were Senate hearings, not to promote legislation, but to alert the public as to the corrupt and blatant messages being sold to children.

Subsequently they met with members of recording industry associations and after much discussion, an agreement was reached whereby companies producing the recordings would place parental advisory labels on their own releases which include violent or sexually explicit messages. One might consider this a current rendition of the fox guarding the hen house!

Unfortunately the industry has used the label as a license to act even more irresponsibly. The problem is that many recordings which should be labeled are not and often the labels are not very obvious. In addition, the industry continues to contract with artists encouraging them to capitalize on the bizarre, obscene and corrupt messages that would be objectionable to most parents - IF the parents were aware of what their children were hearing. It is the responsibility of parents and adults supervising young people to know the content, but how can they be aware of the lyrics if the packages are wrapped and the lyrics inside? They cannot review the lyrics before purchase and the stores will not refund the money after the package is opened. Most adults want to act responsibly, but they need tools to help

them make choices commensurate with their own values. There is legislation that indicates consumers have the right to know about any product they purchase. For instance, our food is labeled - every ingredient. We know more what is in a jar of pickles than we know about the contents of the music being sold to our children!

We recognize that the music industry is a business and the executives are responsible to stockholders for a return on investments. The greater the return the higher the salaries, the opportunity for acquisitions and more market share. We understand that. We also understand the musicians right of expression and know that many talented persons are using their talents to impact our young people in a negative way when they could have such a positive influence. The industry could promote music that would be uplifting rather than this overkill of the harmful. So many of our young people do not even know the wonderful music that abounds - with music eliminated in public schools, students have not been exposed to the many genre such as jazz, show tunes, classical and spirituals. They have not learned to read music nor to sing. All they know are the TOP FORTY.

The industry does not show that it cares about our youth. They have two lines they promote - one is pushing the line of indecency to entice young people and the other is the bottom line called greed. The recording industry should have an interest in providing the best for our youth; however, they promote negative messages which are not only immoral, but which advocate illegal acts with results that can be devastating for our young people and society. There is evidence that people act out what they see and hear. When the music is put with imagery and words, the action on the part of the listener becomes active, not passive. The imagery becomes very real.

People ask what is wrong with America? Unfortunately the entertainment industry has a great influence. Some in the music industry fight drugs, are involved with the homeless, the elderly, and the hungry and they are concerned about the violence, but they are talking out of both sides of their mouth. Their good works are overshadowed by the volume of recordings that are the antithesis of their good programs. Young people are listening to music for HOURS every day and they are watching MTV which puts imagery in their fertile minds. How do we know it has an impact? Just consider how Berlitz teaches a foreign language? They teach it by repetition. They bombard the brain with the same words over and over again. The brain receives ALL messages - it does not discriminate between retaining or discarding the good and the bad. What you put in the brain stays and if you feed the brain messages which are detrimental there will be an outcome that resembles the input. The more vulnerable the child, the greater the possibility that the negative messages

will create problems. This does not say that every negative is going to corrupt every child, but continuous exposure does have an effect. Dr. Mark I. Singer of Case Western Reserve University completed a study on the Mental Health Consequences of Adolescents' Exposure to Violence in which he studied violent adolescents. 93.4% of the most-violent males and 95.8% females listen to music as their coping mechanism. Consider the music and one can imagine the results. The music industry is saturating the market with the messages which are hurting young people not only in America, but around the world.

While in Greece last summer, I had the opportunity to talk with prominent people of that country. I was asked the question "why are you sending such violent music, television and movies to our country?" How can I answer that question other than to respond - greed. Their philosopher Plato even indicated that music forms character and therefore plays an important role in determining social and political issues, he stated "When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the states change with them."

The labels were not advocated to provide a shield for the industry and the artists, (they view it as protection against law suits), but it was hoped that the industry would both comply with the labeling and stop contracting with performers who advocated actions which would be harmful. We understand that they the artists feel they are the reflection of society and not one of the causes of the problem, but since they are viewed as idols they do have an influence on our youth. You in the Congress are concerned about smoking, but these lyrics are equally harmful - we are talking about telling young people to take drugs, drink alcohol, and rape. The venom in some lyrics would not be allowed in most homes. The current idol, Marilyn Manson evokes shouts and cheers in his concerts when he advocates taking drugs and killing parents. Unfortunately many parents have no idea about these idols who have such an influence on their children. We receive calls from adults constantly who voice their concerns and express that they do not know how to combat this problem. They cannot identify music which is within their value system. Many of the recordings are not only violent, but much is verbal pornography!

Do the labels work? NO! There are standardized labels, but no standards.

Some companies label and others do not.

Packages occasionally have enclosures which are offensive, but are not labeled.

A child of any age can purchase recordings. When the Senate hearing on "The Impact of Violent Music " was held on November 6, 1998, Hillary Rosen, President of the Recording Industry

Association of America stated the RIAA supports the restriction that no one under 17 can purchase recordings which are labeled. A boy who appears to be 12, but is 14, went unaccompanied into a store in Tennessee, at my request, last week and purchased a Marilyn Manson recording, no questions asked. An adult tried to return it, but the store would not accept the return. Stores often refuse to refund the cost of recordings which an adult finds objectionable. In fact, we have been told that there is a limit as to the number of recordings each store can return. Obviously that does not bode well for the concerned parent who wants to make a return and cannot as the store has reached its limit. The same young boy went into another store to make the same purchase and they would not allow him to buy the recording stating he was too young - that store should get ALL the business.

Music executives state that movies and television have similar contents - that is true as young people are avid viewers, but our youth are constantly listening to music. They play it while walking, riding, exercising, eating, while in malls, at school events and doing homework. Music is very much a part of their everyday activity and it is a very powerful tool. Music is known to heal, to calm and to excite. Music with lyrics can have an even greater impact.

While speaking at a conference called by the Lieutenant Governor of Alabama, a young girl asked if she could make a comment. She said, "you complain of the actions of youth, but who makes the movies, who sells the alcohol, who produces the television, who writes the advertising, who imports the drugs, who contracts with the artists, who use and abuse young people for sex - adults do and then you blame the young people and ask us why we act as we do? The truth hurts.

The PMRC does not approve of censorship, but just as in everything we do, each must act responsibly and when we do not there are consequences. We are reaping the consequences of a society that has set aside values and civility. There are laws which have been enacted to protect children. We have seen many times how industry plays both sides of the street. They say they care, but look what they do. We implore the industry to address the needs of parents and communities and that the industry become the parent's friend. There need to be changes and we need to make them now. A more effective system would be to make the labels more specific as to content, similar to television ratings.

The First Amendment was not written to provide license to corrupt children and we are not asking for legislation, but we are asking for cooperation within the industry. We are all familiar with the words from the Bible which state "Bring up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it."

The industry is constantly capturing our next generation. Morality, civility and virtues have made civilizations prosper and have been the basis for noble leadership. Today that is lacking in America. We can either be the beacon on the hill for good or the Sodom and Gomorrah of the next century. Our youth will answer that question as they mature and we as adults are responsible for the result.

We thank you, Senators, for your concern and for this hearing. In bringing this issue to the public you provide an excellent forum to address this vital subject. We who are on the front lines on a daily basis appreciate this opportunity.